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Vision for future: Open University of Nepal

The Open University will help bring quality higher education to doorsteps of disadvantaged people.

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Published in Republica, Nepal's National Daily, Kathmandu 27 August 2012,

The growing thirst for education has been one of the most inspiring developments in Nepal lately. But despite the progress in basic education, the access to higher education in the country is still limited with an overall low gross enrolment rate. This is the result of rampant disparity in access to higher education across income quintile, gender, caste/ethnicity and geography. Especially alarming is the fact that the bottom two-fifth of the country's population by income has less than two percent gross enrolment rate.

The expansion in higher education intake has taken place mainly in the private sector. This

trend is likely to widen the gap of educational access between those who can pay for higher education and those who cannot. Further, the quality of higher education in Nepal is not consistent across the colleges. The public campuses often have fared worse than their private counterparts. This calls for a systemic arrangement for quality education and its accreditation, particularly with a mechanism to uplift the quality of public institutions of higher education. One way to enhancing the universal access, enrolment rate and quality in higher education is the open and distance education system, which can complement the campus-based conventional education. Open University education is also necessary to remove the manifold barriers, and thus to help bring higher education particularly to the disadvantaged people at their door steps.

Realizing this, the Non-Resident Nepali Association (NRNA) in partnership with the Canada Foundation for Nepal (CFFN) and Government of Nepal has taken the initiative to establish an Open University of Nepal (OUN). This vision first received a formal shape at the NRNA's Regional Conference in Houston in May 2010. Subsequently, a significant background work has been done. Athabasca University (AU), Canada's Open University, has supported the initiative right from the beginning. A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for collaboration was signed among NRNA, CFFN and AU in September 2010. This was followed by the signing of a Resolution of Agreement (RoA) between the NRNA and the Ministry of Education, Nepal in October 2010, formalizing the Open University of Nepal Steering Committee (OUNSC).

All the existing universities in Nepal were established by a specific Act for each university. There is no generic law for establishing a new university. The government has prepared a legislative bill named "Higher Education Bill, 2068", which has been endorsed by all concerned ministries, the National Planning Commission, and the Cabinet of Ministers. It has already been tabled in the Parliament. The OUNSC has been supporting this move to provide a legal foundation leading to formally establishing the Open University of Nepal. The proposed bill remains amongst the highest priority bills to be brought forward to the Legislative Committee of the now dissolved Constituent Assembly. Passage of this bill will provide the ultimate legal status for the OUN. Meanwhile, continued effort was made to get a special mandate from the Cabinet of Ministers to pave a way in the interim for OUN's foundation-building work. This work meeting with many bureaucratic and procedural hurdles finally resulted in the Cabinet passing an executive order to establish Open University Infrastructure Development Board (OUIDC) as an arm's length agency of the government.

The next step is to launch a series of pilot academic programs now proposed in collaboration with foreign institutions—primarily the Athabasca University. The proposed pilot programs would not only test the modalities of public distance and open higher education in Nepal, but also help gain real-life knowledge and skills learned by the students from the programs delivered. An

operational set of academic programs was worked out over a planning meeting organized on May 18, 2012 at Athabasca University in Canada. The meeting considered academic programs for the OUN Initiative's pilot phase.

Meanwhile, a network of infrastructure of selected higher secondary schools and existing university campuses will be persuaded to participate in the pilot academic programs in a collaborative venture of OUN Initiative with Athabasca University and other Nepali and foreign institutions. To successfully run the pilot programs, it is imperative to obtain strong support of the government, get approval for the proposed pilot programs with required accreditation, and for seeking funding from bilateral and multilateral agencies. Once the pilot programs are launched successfully, the resources from domestic and external sources will likely begin to flow, while a legislative instrument for an autonomous university will also be in place for making the OUN a reality. In order to facilitate Nepali Diaspora's support to the OUN initiative, NRNs's national coordination councils (NCC), such as the NRN-Canada, are beginning to coordinate a support mechanism.

The OUN was not conceived just to add one more entity to the count of existing universities, nor was there any motive for competing with each other. The OUN was conceived to fill the existing gaps in the areas of knowledge as well as for improving access to higher education for the marginalized groups on two main considerations: 1) An open university is best suited to countries like Nepal that are characterized by high population growth, low employment levels, majority of the people with subsistence agriculture and rural orientation, arduous geographical areas and low availability of physical infrastructure; and 2) It is an opportunity to provide targeted access to higher education from the bottom up.

The Diaspora members involved in the OUN initiative have a clear vision, mission and roadmap for the establishment of a unique, modern, high quality, relevant, equitable and readily accessible institution of higher learning for all Nepalis. The recently established OUIDC is expected to work closely and collaboratively with the Diaspora community in every step of establishing the foundational infrastructure and functional mechanism for the OUN. If all goes according to plan, Nepal should have its first national university for open and distance higher education by 2015.

The OUN initiative has received strong support from the governmental and other public agencies, academicians, media, political leaders and policymakers. Although tangible achievements are yet to be realized, it is worth noting that seven governmental agencies—University Grant Commission; Ministries of Education, Law and Finance; National Planning Commission; Cabinet of Ministers; and the Legislature Parliament (when in place)—are formally

committed to the process while many more influential agencies and leaders are involved informally. The moral pressure that has been mounting for the establishment of the OUN is significant, and all signs now indicate a definite outlet for the OUN in the near future.

The authors are four initial proponents of NRNs' initiative for Open University of Nepal and can be reached at: drona.rasali@hotmail.com.

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